A Study on Fake Reviews in the Realm of Moral Disengagement and Moral Distress

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

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DECLARATION BY THE SCHOLAR

I hereby declare that the short synopsis entitled "**A Study on Fake Reviews in the Realm of Moral Disengagement and Moral Distress**"being submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the **Department of Management & Commerce** under the **School of Management & Commerce**of ManavRachnaUniversity, Faridabad during the academic year **2023-2024.**

It is the work that is expected to be carried out under the supervision of **Prof. Pooja Kapoor** and co-supervision of **Dr. Chand Prakash Saini** and**Dr. Anjali Thukral.**

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CERTIFICATE BY SUPERVISOR(S)

This is to certify that, the short synopsis entitled "**A Study on Fake Reviews in the Realm of Moral Disengagement and Moral Distress"** is anoriginal piece of work done by research scholar**Nidhi Aggarwal** under the supervision of **Prof. Pooja Kapoor** and co-supervision of **Dr. Chand Prakash Saini**and**Dr. Anjali Thukral** for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the **Department ofManagement & Commerce** under the **School ofManagement & Commerce** Manav Rachna University, Faridabad during the academic year **2023-2024.**
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Abstract

Online reviews have become an essential source of information for customers, influencing their purchasing decisions in the rapidly evolving landscape of e-commerce. The proliferation of fake reviews, on the other hand, poses a significant challenge to both customers and businesses by undermining the credibility of online platforms. Consumers can make unethical decisions by posting fake reviews, which can have devastating results for companies, stakeholders, and themselves. We suggest that examining personal motivations and how they affect moral disengagement—a mental process that renders moral self-control inactive and permits people to act contrary to their own moral principles—can provide light on the causes of these kinds of behaviours.

First, we will investigate whether constructs specifically intrinsic and extrinsic variables, are related to motivations for posting fake reviews. Second, we will investigate moral disengagement as a potential mediator between customers' motives and the posting of fake reviews. Third, we will try to explore the moderating effect of morality on the relationship between unethical behaviour of posting fake reviews and moral distress. Strengthening the authenticity of online reviews is crucial for fostering customers' trust and sustaining the growth of e-commerce. As online platforms continue to reshape customers' behavior, understanding and mitigating fake reviews, it is imperative to ensure the integrity of online information and promote a transparent digital marketplace.

Keywords: Fake reviews, Motives, Self-determination theory, Moral Disengagement, Moral Distress, Morality, Online Platforms

CONTENTS

S. No.	Description	Page No.
1	Introduction	1-4
2	Theoretical Background	5
3	Literature Review	6-9
4	Objectives	10
5	Methodology	11-13
6	Expected Outcome	14
7	References	15-18

1. Introduction

Online feedback from customers are a sort of informal business communication wherein customers, as opposed to businesses, create and disseminate information about goods, services, or companies using a variety of internet channels. According to Anderson and Simester (2014) and Hu et al. (2012), it is assumed that: (1) the review is unbiased; and (2) and it is not incentivized (Román, Riquelme, and Iacobucci 2023). Academics are starting to look at fraudulent reviews from the perspective of the customer.

Fake reviews are artificial marketing outputs because they do not represent genuine customer experiences with products and services (Salminen et al. 2022a).

Fake reviews are also known as "deceptive reviews," "false reviews", "manipulative reviews", "bogus reviews", "deceptive opinion spam", "review spam", "non-spontaneous reviews", "rewarded reviews", "requested reviews", "pseudo reviews" or "review fraud" posted by different perpetrators including customers, merchants, artificial intelligence agents, publishers, writers or review platforms (Y. Wu et al. 2020; Baek, Ahn, and Choi 2012; Pihlaja et al. 2017; Harrison-Walker and Jiang 2023; de Gregorio, Fox, and Yoon 2021). The types of fake reviews can be positive, negative, or neutral (Salminen et al. 2022b; Y. Wu et al. 2020; Verma et al. 2023). It is an indication that there is a large group of web users who are engaged in writing reviews that are inconsistent with the genuine experiences of products and services. Their motives may range from malicious intentions to benevolent intentions (Banerjee and Chua 2023).

People worry about morality and ethics, on the other hand (Aquino and Americus 2002). Because they care about acting morally and because unethical behaviour can lead to self-censoring, people usually avoid doing things on purpose that go against peoples moral norms (Bandura et al. 1996). Their goal is to bring their moral principles and their actual behaviour closer together. People suffer moral distress when objectives and behaviours do not align. This is because people experience cognitive dissonance, a psychologically tense state that arises when beliefs and behaviour are at odds (Festinger 1957). Moral conflict in morally troubling circumstances brought on by internal or external constraints is what causes moral distress.

The intensity of each person's repercussions varies as well. Psychological disequilibrium and negative affective states, such as self-blame, self-criticism, despair, anxiety, shame, agony, and sarcasm that appear in psychological discomfort, are caused by moral distress (Čartolovni et al. 2021). According to Baumeister and Heatherton (1996), people may reduce their moral distress by either altering their beliefs or their action to better align with their objectives, or by changing both (Shu, Gino, and Bazerman 2011). Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend if consumers who submit fake reviews undergo moral discomfort and whether, upon moral education, they alter their post-posting conduct in the setting of fake reviews.

So, the key questions are 1) why do customers engage in the unethical behavior of posting fake reviews on different online platforms and 2) do customers feel moral distress after posting fake reviews? 3) do customers modify their post behaviour of posting fake reviews? The answer, we believe, lies largely in the realms of motivation and morality. Whether or not customers consider posting fake reviews, is an issue of motivation and morality.

In the pursuit of understanding the reasons behind immoral choices and behaviours, researchers have recently directed their attention on the possible impact of a cognitive process called moral disengagement (Detert, Treviño, and Sweitzer 2008). The self-regulatory mechanisms that often prevent people from acting in ways that go against their own moral norms are disengaged (deactivated) when moral disengagement takes place (Bandura et al. 1996). We suggest that examining the motivations of consumers and how they affect the cognitive process i.e. moral disengagement that renders moral self-control inactive and permits people to act contrary to their own moral principles—can shed light on the causes of these behaviours (Baron, Zhao, and Miao 2015).

Since customers' motives are conceptually tied to and directly associated with their perceptions and cognitions, we have chosen to examine customers' motivations as predictors of moral disengagement to write fake reviews. This study used SDT (Ryan and Deci 2002) as the motivating framework to examine the links between consumer motives and publishing fake reviews. For example, (Locke & Baum 2007) point out that

motivations have a significant influence on how entrepreneurs behave and interact with information and cognition.

"Moral Disengagement," a phenomenon where cognitive processes render moral self-regulation inactive, leads to dishonest or immoral activity that lacks self-reproach or overt signs of remorse and shame (Bandura et al. 1996; Detert, Treviño, and Sweitzer 2008; Liu et al. 2023). The link between people's moral convictions and their offences is mediated by moral disengagement.

Despite the fact that moral disengagement is a new in organisational research, research on its causes and effects has expanded quickly, greatly advancing our knowledge regarding children, college students and workers (Moore et al., 2012; Samnani, Singh, and Ezzedeen 2013). The main goal of this line of inquiry thus far has been to validate moral disengagement as a valid notion in consumer behaviour. According to (Moore et al. 2012), more studies conducted in this context would be particularly valuable.

We investigate the mediating mechanism od moral disengagement between customers' personal motives and their propensity to make unethical behaviours, including writing fake reviews of items available on online platforms, in response to this demand while expanding on past research. Customers who act unethically or make aw can cause harm that is particularly severe and wide-ranging in comparison to children, college students, or entry-level workers (e.g., harmful impact on product sales, profitability, brand reputation, consumer trust, and market efficacy). Therefore, understanding consumers' decisions requires an understanding of their self-regulation (Baron, Zhao, and Miao 2015).

We anticipate that customers will have high competitive motivation to maximise their own interests, which serves as a stimulus for moral disengagement (Liu et al. 2023) and leads them to post fake reviews. However, (Shu, Gino, and Bazerman 2011) discovered bringing people's conscience to moral standards reduces dishonest behaviour, providing us with a foundation to investigate whether morality moderates customers' post-purchase behaviour of posting fake reviews.

To achieve the same, we divide the whole study into three research questions –

RQ 1: What are the determinants of moral disengagement with respect to fake reviews.?

RQ 2: Does moral disengagement mediate between customers' motives and the posting of fake reviews?

RQ 3: To explore the moderating effect of morality on the relationship between posting fake reviews and moral distress.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Self-Determination Theory

Based on the extent to which each motivational type is independently supported by a person, (Ryan and Deci 2002) define six motivational types: introjected motivation, external motivation, identifiable motivation, integrated motivation, autonomous motivation, and amotivation. With the exception of amotivation, which is the absence of purpose to act, the other five states are either intrinsic or extrinsic in nature. Motivation can explained via two types as per SDT namely: controlled motivationand autonomous motivation (Ryan and Deci 2002).

Extrinsic motivation is activity driven by the need to achieve distinct goals, whether these goals are dictated by external controls and pressures or by self-imposed constraints like pride or shame (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Behaviour driven by an innate curiosity, pleasure from the task at hand, or a value attached to it is referred to as autonomous motivation. The satisfaction of an individual's fundamental psychological requirements for relatedness (making connections with others), competence (successful functioning), and autonomy (a sense of personal initiative and decision) is necessary for the development of autonomous motivation. Conversely, unsatisfied requirements for these three areas lead to controlled motivation (Hodge et al. 2013).

2.2 Moral Disengagement Theory

According to Bandura et al. (1996) moral disengagement is characterised by a group of psychological processes that include moral justification, responsibility displacement, and consequence distortion. These processes enable people to act unethically without feeling self-righteous or experiencing overt guilt and shame. Moore (2008) integrated nearly linked mechanisms to establish the three major categories outlined below, although Bandura (1986) identified 8 mechanisms of moral disengagement which are interrelated. Initially, people have the ability to mentally manipulate unacceptable behaviours into becoming less dangerous or even harmless by employing strategies like euphemism naming and favourable comparison.

Second, by distributing or moving responsibility, people might lessen their own personal involvement in immoral actions. Lastly, individuals have the option to lessen their connection with others who suffer from destructive activities or even to hold them responsible for the harm they do. For example, some people could think, "I am totally justified because my main rival is such a horrible, exploitative employer."

3. Literature Review

3.1 Self-Determination Theory of Motivation and Moral Disengagement

Motivation is often studied in the literature as a good indicator of reasons to participate in different human behaviour processes (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Likewise, the theory of motivation has extensive documentation on the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Studies that examine the reasons behind submitting fictitious evaluations online have also employed the SDT (Zaman et al. 2023; P. F. Wu 2019). This study uses the SDT to categorize these motives into two groups: intrinsic, or autonomous, and extrinsic, or controlled, depending on their valence, or positive and negative.

According to SDT, persons who participate in an activity because they find it to be innately fascinating, happy, or pleasurable are acting in an intrinsically driven manner. People are driven by external incentive to act in certain ways in order to get praise, recognition, and even to avoid negative consequences (Deci and Ryan 1985; Zaman et al. 2023). Fake reviews are often posted by customers who are driven by external or internal factors (Zaman et al., 2023). People's moral dissonance lessens when they are motivated to prefer or enjoy immoral activity, which motivates them to act in that way (Zaman et al.,2023). According to Liu et al. (2023), we predict that consumers would be highly motivated to maximize their personal interests, which will act as a catalyst for moral disengagement and a rise in unethical activity.

Based on a feeling of volition and choice, autonomous motivation is usually linked to something that the person finds personally meaningful and engaging (Deci & Ryan, 2000). As opposed to controlled motivation and choice, which involves exerting external pressure on an individual to take action (Sweeney et al. 2014). Consumers with extrinsic, or dominant controllable, motives look for extrinsic incentives like free merchandise, cash prizes, and financial recompense, as well as fame, recognition, and a sense of mastery.

Likewise, clients with dominant autonomous, or intrinsic, motives are more focused on their own happiness, hobbies, and connections to friends, family, and other people (Y. Wu et al. 2020; Zaman et al. 2023; P. F. Wu 2019). Consumers who are prosocially driven (Heriyati 2020) or who place a high value on monetary benefits (Baron, Zhao, and Miao 2015) will be enticed to do anything and, as a consequence, will be more prone to write phoney reviews (Y. Wu et al. 2020) and morally disconnect.

The goal of this study is to use SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000) as the motivating framework to analyse why consumers publish phoney reviews when they are ethically disengaged. According to Hodge et al. (2013), moral disengagement, or the selective use of eight psychosocial manoeuvres and attribution of blame—allows people to break moral standards (like using PEDs) without feeling guilty or other negative emotions. This reduces the constraints on future immoral behaviour.

3.2 Moral Disengagement and Unethical Behaviour

Bandura (1986, 1990) posits that dishonesty results from a cognitive process i.e. moral disengagement, that deactivates moral conscience. According to Bandura (1990) and Bandura et al. (1996), moral disengagement is the process of persuading oneself that a dubious conduct is ethically acceptable, therefore justifying destructive behaviour. The link between people's moral convictions and their transgressions is mediated by moral disengagement (Shu, Gino, and Bazerman 2011). We understand moral disengagement as a behavioural consequence in order to understand why common people consistently rationalise dishonest actions

We focus on cheating, which is characterised as self-serving activity that deviates from social norms or regulations. It is hypothesised that people with a strong desire to make money would concentrate on information and cues that are directly relevant to making money, including maximising earnings. Strong intentions cause individuals to "see" (i.e., perceive) what they want to "see," according to Balcetis and Dunning (2006, p. 621).
Research indicates that moral disengagement is a predictor of antisocial conduct (Stanger et al. 2018).

3.3 Unethical Behaviour, Morality, and Moral Distress

Psychologists have long been interested in how unethical conduct affects people psychologically. (Klass 1978) reviews a number of research on people's emotions of shame,

remorse, and self-worth following moral transgressions. (Mazar, Amir, and Ariely 2008) found that bringing moral norms to people's notice deters dishonest activity.

Moral saliency may increase people's rigidity in their ethical judgements while decreasing their inclination to conduct dishonest behaviours. 2011; Shu, Gino, and Bazerman. Self-threat has been shown by Jordan and Monin (2008) to boost morale through a phenomenon they refer to as "the sucker-to-saint effect." People experience cognitive dissonance, a psychologically tense state that arises when beliefs conflict with activity, when actions and intentions do not align (Festinger, 1957).

When someone has a moral opinion on something but doesn't follow through on it, it can lead to moral discomfort. This happens when a group or a stronger person obstructs progress. When someone acts in a way that goes against their moral convictions, they experience both short-term discomfort and internal dissonance. This can lead to a rupture in their moral identity and inner self, which can cause long-term anxiety and social disengagement (Čartolovni et al. 2021). Reduction strategies are necessary to alleviate the psychological pain caused by dissonance (Elkin &Leippe, 1986).

3.4 Moral Distress and Moral Self-Regulation

Dissonance motivation is defined as psychological discomfort that leads to the attitude change process (Shu, Gino, and Bazerman 2011) when negative behaviour is attributed internally (to one's own choice, not to the force of another). According to Bandura (1986), moral self-regulation happens through several processes, which involves people reflecting on their own choices and behaviours; self-judgmental processes. These fundamental self-control systems typically prevent people from acting in ways that they disagree with. But not every circumstance causes these restraint mechanisms to function automatically. In fact, their social cognitive process may be deactivated, which frees people from feeling bad about themselves or self-censure, enabling them to act in ways they otherwise would not (Baron, Zhao, and Miao 2015). It takes more than just moral awareness to behave morally. To act, one has to be driven and able to exercise adequate self-control (Thornberg, Jungert, and Hong 2023).

Self-interest and moral beliefs usually have to be traded off when making an ethical decision, & if customers can hide the moral consequences of a choice, they can make self-serving choices & yet feel that they are morally right. According to Shu, Gino, and Bazerman (2011), people may reduce their suffering in moral domains by either altering their beliefs or their action to better align with their objectives.

Objectives

1. To explore the determinants of moral disengagement with respect to fake reviews posted on online platforms.
2. To examine the mediating role of moral disengagement between customers' motives and the posting of fake reviews.
3. To examine the moderating effect of morality on the relationship between posting fake reviews and moral distress.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research design

To answer the research questions, we will follow a qualitative as well as quantitative research approach. The research questions, conceptual model, and methodology have been given below.

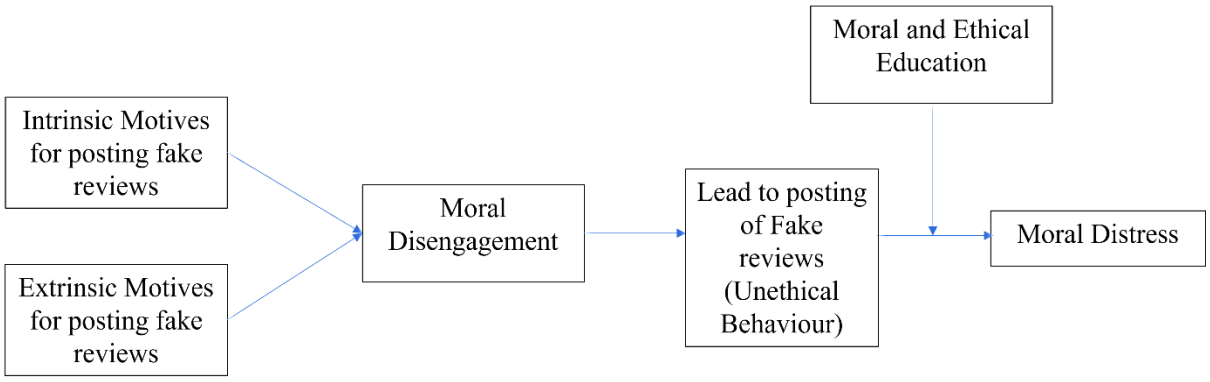
The following research questions are to be explored-

RQ 1: What are the determinants of moral disengagement with respect to fake reviews?

RQ 2: Does moral disengagement mediate between customers' motives and the posting of fake reviews?

RQ 3: To explore the moderating effect of morality on the relationship between posting fake reviews and moral distress.

Based on the research questions a conceptual model is given below.


Moral and Ethical Education
Intrinsic Motives for posting fake reviews
Extrinsic Motives for posting fake reviews
Moral Disengagement
Lead to posting of Fake reviews (Unethical Behaviour)
Moral Distress

Conceptual Model

Note: Source: Authors.

5.2 Research Methodology

To study **RQ1**, a qualitative research methodology will be used to investigate the reasons behind customers' posting of fake reviews on various online platforms.

Sample size: minimum - 25 respondents, maximum – 30 - 40 respondents

Sampling technique: Snowball sampling technique.

Area: Delhi/NCR

The data will be obtained from semi-structured interviews with the customers. As we try to explore customers motives hence, customers who have already posted fake reviews would be recruited. Thematic analysis will be conducted by using NVIVO and global themes will be derived.

To study **RQ2**, an Experimental Study will be employed to study the impact of Moral Disengagement on the relationship between customers' motives and the posting of fake reviews.

Sample size: 400 respondents (Cochran, 1977, Hair et al.,2011)

Sampling technique: Purposive sampling technique

Area: Delhi/NCR

The data will be obtained through a semi structured questionnaire based on 5-point Likert scale. Structured Equation Modelling will be used to analyze the data.

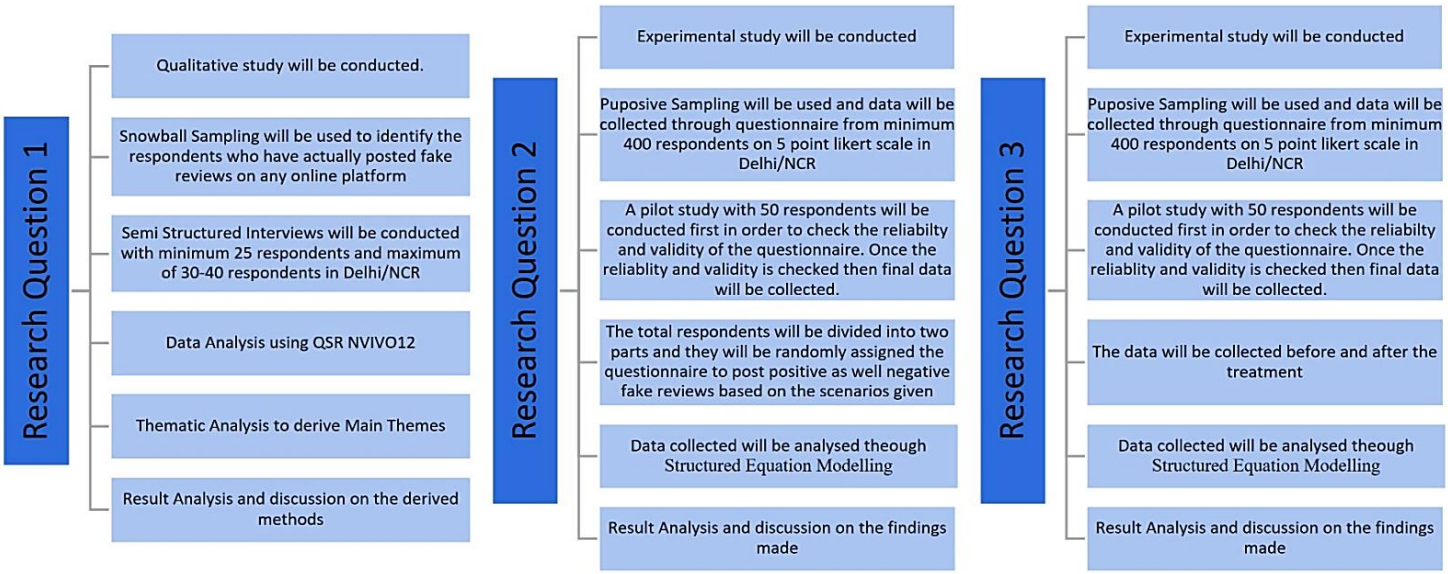
To answer **RQ3**, an Experimental Study will be employed to study the impact of Morality as a moderator on the relationship between posting fake reviews and moral distress.
Sample size: 400 respondents (Cochran, 1977, Hair et al.,2011)

Sampling technique: Purposive sampling technique

Area: Delhi/NCR

The data will be obtained through a semi structured questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale. Structured Equation Modelling will be used to analyze the data.

The diagrammatic presentation of the research methodology is as follows –


Research Question 1
Qualitative study will be conducted.
Snowball Sampling will be used to identify the respondents who have actually posted fake reviews on any online platform
Semi Structured Interviews will be conducted with minimum 25 respondents and maximum of 30-40 respondents in Delhi/NCR
Data Analysis using QSR NVIVO12
Thematic Analysis to derive Main Themes
Result Analysis and discussion on the derived methods
Research Question 2
Experimental study will be conducted
Puposive Sampling will be used and data will be collected through questionnaire from minimum 400 respondents on 5 point likert scale in Delhi/NCR
A pilot study with 50 respondents will be conducted first in order to check the reliabilty and validity of the questionnaire. Once the reliablity and validity is checked then final data will be collected.
The total respondents will be divided into two parts and they will be randomly assigned the questionnaire to post positive as well negative fake reviews based on the scenarios given
Data collected will be analysed theough Structured Equation Modelling
Result Analysis and discussion on the findings made
Research Question 3
Experimental study will be conducted
Puposive Sampling will be used and data will be collected through questionnaire from minimum 400 respondents on 5 point likert scale in Delhi/NCR
A pilot study with 50 respondents will be conducted first in order to check the reliabilty and validity of the questionnaire. Once the reliablity and validity is checked then final data will be collected.
The data will be collected before and after the treatment
Data collected will be analysed theough Structured Equation Modelling
Result Analysis and discussion on the findings made

Note: Source: Authors.

6 Proposed/ExpectedOutcomes

- **Theoretical Contribution**

First, this study **enhances the literature by incorporating SDT and Moral Disengagement theory** in the context of fake reviews posted on online platforms.

Second, the study provides a **comprehensive view of the motives of the customers to post fake reviews** as determinants of moral disengagement on different online platforms.

Third, the study will help in **understanding the role of moral disengagement** in the customers' moral self-regulation process.

Fourth, the **study will also explore whether customers feel moral distress after posting fake reviews** on different online platforms

Lastly, the study provides a **comprehensive understanding of the role of moral education in influencing customer behaviour for posting fake reviews.**

- **Practical Contribution**

First, to studying the customers motives to post fake reviews that facilitate a considerably **effective measure to control** fake reviews.

Second, the study will be **helpful for the managers to use moral and ethical education as a tool to educate customers** to refrain them from posting fake reviews.

Third, the study will help managers to understand **the cognitive process** of customers before and after posting fake reviews.

Fourth, as fake reviews have a significant negative impact on a number of stakeholders, including customers, retailers, and platforms, **the study will assist managers in developing strategies** that will effectively address the needs of these stakeholders.

Finally, **comprehending and proficiently handling fraudulent reviews may ensure the robust growth of e-commerce**, hence enhancing the well-being of multiple stakeholders and augmenting confidence in virtual commerce.

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Abstract

Online reviews have become an essential source of information for customers, influencing their purchasing decisions in the rapidly evolving landscape of e-commerce. The proliferation of fake reviews, on the other hand, poses a significant challenge to both customers and businesses by undermining the credibility of online platforms. Consumers can make unethical decisions by posting fake reviews, which can have devastating results for companies, stakeholders, and themselves. We suggest that examining personal motivations and how they affect moral disengagement—a mental process that renders moral self-control inactive and permits people to act contrary to their own moral principles—can provide light on the causes of these kinds of behaviours.

First, we will investigate whether constructs specifically intrinsic and extrinsic variables, are related to motivations for posting fake reviews. Second, we will investigate moral disengagement as a potential mediator between customers' motives and the posting of fake reviews. Third, we will try to explore the moderating effect of morality on the relationship

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